

Published at <http://www.bmcreview.org/2015/06/20150621.html>

Torrey Seland (ed.), *Reading Philo: A Handbook to Philo of Alexandria*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014. Pp. xvi, 345. ISBN 9780802870698. \$45.00 (pb).

Reviewed by Sami Yli-Karjanmaa, University of Helsinki ([sami.yli-karjanmaa@helsinki.fi](mailto:sami.yli-karjanmaa@helsinki.fi))

[Version at BMCR home site](#)

### [Preview](#)

"I'm afraid of him." This comment about Philo by an established biblical scholar which I once heard in an international gathering is, I think, reflective of the reasons why Philo is still used so little in both biblical and classical studies. The "fear of getting him wrong," so the scholar specified, is understandable given the large size of his corpus, the complexity of his allegories and the (largely unfounded) reputation of inconsistency. Given this state of affairs, every opportunity should be seized to make the Alexandrian exegete more accessible. My perception of this need informs this review: seasoned scholars who have yet to embark on the study of Philo differ little in this respect from the M.A. and Ph.D. students at whom *Reading Philo* is aimed. There are not too many handbooks on Philo, and additions are warmly welcome. They should have clarity, consistency and comprehensiveness as their aims.

The authors of the eleven essays of the present book are all internationally-known names, but what gives this book a character of its own is that seven articles are by Nordic scholars; the book is the product of an initiative originally made by the Finnish scholar Karl-Gustav Sandelin, albeit in a reduced form. *Reading Philo* features clear typesetting and is almost free of typos, and it consists of an introduction and two main parts: "Philo of Alexandria in Context" (five articles) and "Why and How to Study Philo" (also five).

The book has its strengths and weaknesses. The former are found in the individual contributions many of which contain valuable information, critical insights, apt analyses and useful recommendations. I will return to examples of these below; but I first discuss some of the weaknesses, which are mainly related to how the book is put together. For a student beginning on Philo it would have been helpful if a more clearly discernable connecting-thread ran through the book. This may not be so easy in a collection of essays—although that only raises the question of whether there is an inherent tension between the book's goal to tutor the beginner and its multiple authorship—yet the editor could have done more towards this end. Cross-references are extremely rare, although the same and similar issues are discussed in different contributions (for example, the Alexandrian conflicts of 38 to 41 C.E. by Seland, Koskeniemi and Birnbaum). Given that there is no general index either, this means that the reader has to go through the book in its entirety if s/he wants to be sure of finding what it has to offer on a particular topic.

The book should have presented, at the outset, an introduction to Philo's large *oeuvre* and its classification into various genres, and a summary of their nature and content.<sup>1</sup> The reader is nowhere introduced to the established division of the corpus into five (the three Pentateuchal commentary series, the apologetic and historical works, and the philosophical works). Gregory Sterling applies parts of it

by discussing the three commentary series (149-50), but Sandelin (25) and Borgen (75-7) use Borgen's own less consistent division according to which, e.g., both *Contempl.* and *Legat.* become representatives of "Pentateuchal principles applied to contemporary issues and events" (25), which hardly describes their essential characteristics. However, regardless of which division is used, the most important thing would have been to explicitly take up the issue, inform the (novice!) reader of the alternatives, and make a conscious choice to be stuck to by all the contributors.

There are two issues of content that I wish to bring up. First, the amount of attention devoted to Philo's exegetical method and the scholarly progress made in "breaking it open" is less than satisfactory:<sup>2</sup> two important articles by David Runia on this issue are not mentioned in *Reading Philo*.<sup>3</sup> Philo's midrashic way of abruptly moving between biblical texts is one of the hallmarks of his method, and it is important to help the beginner to see that there is a method to it: the secondary biblical lemmas are linked with the primary ones through verbal or thematic connections. Thus when, e.g., Borgen in his otherwise informative discussion of Philonic exegesis (81-98) does not explicitly explain why a section from *Numbers* is commented on in a work devoted to *Genesis* (i.e. at *Leg.* 3.69-106), he fails to look at the matter from the beginner's viewpoint (p. 93).<sup>4</sup> (The explanation, "extensive expositions of interrelated passages," does come, four pages later, but without reference to Philo's method.) More attention could have been devoted to Philo's "allegorical elaborations and its [sic] Platonic bent" (101) and the use of secondary biblical texts. Sterling, too, mentions the "secondary and tertiary biblical texts in expansive allegorical treatments" (150) in passing only. *Reading Philo* would have benefited from one or two deep, analytical forays into examples of Philonic allegories, their structure, logic and content.

The second issue pertains to the part of the Philonic corpus preserved in Armenian. One of the instructions for reading Philo, endorsed by Seland (164), runs thus: "When pursuing a particular topic in Philo always aim at taking *all the relevant passages* into account. This might be seen to be stating the obvious. But Philo's oeuvre is vast; not all parts are equally accessible (note esp. the Armenian works), yet any subject can turn up virtually anywhere."<sup>5</sup> Whereas an M.A. student may perhaps be excused for overlooking part of Philo's works, this is not the case with those writing a doctoral thesis or doing further research. Sadly, Philo's Armenian corpus is neglected in today's scholarship. The language barrier is not unsurmountable and does not justify studying this part of Philo from the translations of the (Armenian) translation only. The bias is reflected in *Reading Philo* in many ways. For example, whereas the Armenian corpus contains almost a quarter of the surviving text of Philo, it accounts for only 6% of the references to Philonic passages.<sup>6</sup> Even more importantly, there are no instructions as to how to begin to study the Armenian Philo.<sup>7</sup> Is it unfair to criticize the book under review for not trying to rectify a chronic shortcoming in research? That may be a matter of opinion, but in any case the book *could* have made a contribution in this direction and would have thereby served its purpose better.

Each of the individual contributions also has its merits and shortcomings. In a short review it is impossible to do justice to all of them. I will use the rest of the space available to highlight two fine examples. Erkki Koskenniemi's "Philo and Classical Education" is highly informative, soundly critical of previous research, and precise. It is in fact so informative that for example the interesting section titled "Classical Education – A Brief Sketch" (8 pages) is rather more profound than a novice will need. Koskenniemi's description of the situation of the Jews in Alexandria, rounded off by the statement that "Philo lived in a crucial time when both Jews' desire for and their rights to secular education were redefined" (i.e. they diminished, p. 119) made this reviewer ponder: Does this not imply that the

conditions were not favorable for Philo to have markedly *increased* the significance of Greek elements in his exegesis? If so, this could mean that, e.g., his Platonism was largely of an inherited sort.

Adele Reinhartz provides a most useful contribution, entitled "Philo's *Exposition of the Law* and Social History: Methodological Considerations." The key challenge faced by the social historian turning to Philo is his focus on the biblical text. For example, what can be concluded about, e.g., the occurrence in reality of homo-erotic behavior or infant exposure based on Philo's attacks on these phenomena? When our exegete *extends* the scriptural laws, the reader usually has no means of precisely tying this to the concrete conditions of early 1st-century Alexandria. How prevalent were the new phenomena included by Philo under a law he discusses? Other "moves Philo makes with respect to the biblical text" (189-98) include providing a *rationale* where none is found in the Pentateuch, *reinterpreting* an obsolete law, and *specifying* a generally formulated one. Despite the difficulties involved, Reinhartz is able to show that, if one is willing to live with uncertainty, there are ways forward: we can identify Philo's primary concerns, and analyze the occasions where he sees fit to extend or reinterpret the Mosaic legislation. His offhand comments may also be valuable. There is thus room for cautious use of his *Exposition* in socio-historical research, but it needs to be supplemented with other material, be it Philonic, Jewish or non-Jewish.

The book ends with a bibliography (36 pages), an index of modern authors (7; Runia is the most cited scholar followed by Borgen) and an index locorum (16; Plato's works are referred to on no more than six pages), where the Philonic treatises are, commendably, in the alphabetical (and not the "canonical") order.<sup>8</sup> Overall, while *Reading Philo* may not be the ideal book for the beginner, I advise all scholars interested in Philo to take a look at it and see for themselves what it has to offer.

---

## Notes:

1. Fortunately, there is a very good one available, written by James Royse (with the contribution of Adam Kamesar) in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (ed. Kamesar; Cambridge University Press 2009).
2. The quoted phrase has been used by Runia to describe how Philo usually begins his allegorization of a biblical lemma. See next note.
3. "The Structure of Philo's Allegorical Treatises: A Review of Two Recent Studies and Some Additional Comments," *VChr* 38 (1984), 209-56 and "Further Observations on the Structure of Philo's Allegorical Treatises," *VChr* 41 (1987), 105-38. For a recent application of Runia's observations, see Albert C. Geljon and David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: On Cultivation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
4. The reader may not note the anomaly, however, since when Borgen lists the treatises of "the *Allegorical Commentary on Genesis*" he uses the full name of the treatise ("*Allegorical (Interpretation of the) Laws*", 76). The Latin-based abbreviations of the names of Philo's treatises are nowhere presented together with the full names.
5. The recommendations, including this quotation, are from Runia's article, which is most easily accessible on Seland's very useful [website](#). The quote comes from p. 193; emphasis original.
6. Another example is that the Armenian corpus is ignored by Koskeniemi (123) and Sterling (138, 145) in their lists of Philo's mentions of the names of Plato and Socrates.

7. Here is, put briefly, how someone who wishes to get a sense of Philo's original Greek, may go about it. Learn the [Armenian alphabet](#) and install the appropriate keyboard driver or use an [online keyboard](#). Get hold of the Armenian Philonic corpus: it is partly accessible [online](#), partly as a [reprint](#) (this is the only edition mentioned in the book). (The [1892 Zarbhanalean edition](#) of Philo's works extant also in Greek is the toughest to get hold of.) Use Aucher's Latin translation to approximately locate word(s) of interest and see the usual Greek equivalents. See Ralph Marcus, "An Armenian-Greek Index to Philo's Quaestiones and De Vita Contemplativa," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 53 (1933), 251-82. The article is most easily accessible through JStor. Also the translations of the Hellenizing School of translators more generally [are available](#). To find out the basic forms of inflected words use [the Wictionary](#) (good for meanings as well) and [an online course of Classical Armenian](#). There is, fortunately, new research being done on the Armenian Philo; see, e.g., Sara Mancini Lombardi and Paola Pontani (eds.), *Studies on the Ancient Armenia Version of Philo's Works* = *Studies in Philo of Alexandria* 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), mentioned by Seland on p. 165.
8. The latter order, i.e., that in which the treatises appear in most editions, is still used by, e.g. Brill's Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series.